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Global Project Management: Pedagogy For Distributed Teams

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Abstract: This paper reflects on pedagogy for teaching collaborative global projects across universities in different countries. Over a period of four years, students at three universities - one in the United States, one in Singapore and one in the Middle East - enrolled in a course called "Global Project Management". In this course, coordinated across locations, students experience a global project with distant team members. We describe the course experience and student perceptions of the requisite skills, collaboration tools and challenges bearing on effective global project work.

Introduction

In the modern globalized workforce, the ability to effectively work on, and manage, distributed teams and distributed projects is an increasingly important and valued skill. This is especially important for IT professionals with IT outsourcing becoming commonplace. Managing working relationships, instilling project ownership and commitment, negotiating in a global setting and adapting to cultural differences are just some of the experiences that enhance a student's global project management skills. Recent authors have related experiences in teaching courses where these sets of skills are practiced at the undergraduate level: (Westerlund 2008) explored teams performance in remote global teams and (Yadav et al. 2009) discussed requirements gathering in flexible global software development. (Volkema and Rivers 2008) related the experience of a global negotiation in which only emails were allowed for communication.

To date, we have conducted four runs of a course called "Global Project Management" course between a university in the United States, a university in Singapore, and a university in the Middle East. This paper discusses and updates practices that we have adopted, and lessons we have learned in coordinating and teaching the course multiple times across three distant locations. We note the value and challenges in teaching global courses and projects coordinated across distant locations.

Course Objectives and Logistics

The course was conceived with the idea that undergraduate students should benefit from a hands-on experience in a global project with team mates in distant countries. Instructors in the three locations coordinated course design to provide students with a common set of learning objectives and an opportunity for hands-on collaboration. The key common objectives for Global Project Management were defined and communicated to students as follows:

- To learn the basics of effective project management - including communication, coordination and control. This includes learning differences between co-located and global teams.

- To appreciate the importance of culture, language, decision making styles and leadership in international collaborations.
- To experience the practical and tactical issues involved in working collaboratively on a distributed, international team.

We designed the course around a set of common readings and a capstone 'global' collaborative project. Students studied a common set of topics including project initiation, planning, and budgeting; project control, measurement and monitoring for performance and quality; building effective project teams; negotiation basics; working with third parties, communicating and collaborating across political and cultural boundaries, and risk management. Student teams, assigned by the instructors, collaborated with distant classmates on their projects.

Previous Runs

In the spring semester of 2007, the course was taught for the first time to a diverse group of undergraduate students in the United States and Singapore locations. In the U.S. location, the course was open to all undergraduate students of sophomore status or above. It was offered as a half-semester course with no prerequisites. In Singapore, the course was offered as a full semester elective to students majoring in Information Systems, with a prerequisite course in Software Engineering. As such, the Singapore students earned more credits for the course than their counterparts in the U.S. This disparity became an administrative and motivation issue as students in both locations perceived differences in commitments due to the differences in course credits earned.

Seven overlapping weeks were planned with common readings, class discussions and collaborative projects. For the course project, students were assigned to global project teams with counterparts at the partner university. Between both universities, nine teams of students worked on three distinct projects. To keep the interactions manageable, teams consisted of three or four members each, with the Singapore side having fewer members in several teams due to uneven enrollment numbers. Each of these projects had real stakeholders and sponsors, whom students needed to contact, interview, correspond and use for primary resource material. The projects are listed below.

1. Tuning the Capstone Project Course: To recommend changes to the existing Information Systems capstone project courses at both universities to incorporate global collaboration and common course objectives. The assignment involved reviewing existing course documents, revising the syllabus, recommending any modification and improving the experience of global projects.
2. Planning for Rollout of IS Program at a Branch Campus: To prepare a plan for rollout of an Information Systems undergraduate major program at a branch campus in a foreign country. The plan considered timelines, budget, a proposed curriculum and discussion of logistics.
3. Innovate IT Competition: To plan an IT competition for pre-University students in Singapore. The assignment involves planning the logistics for the event, working out a budget and preparing a staffing plan and time-line.

The projects did not involve building a software development, yet they were demanding and difficult, in large part because of client externalities. Students were assigned to submit a team project plan report, an individual reflection report and peer evaluations, together with a project plan presentation. The grading criteria were based on the quality of writing, presentation, preparation, research and analysis of the project. Peer evaluations were used to adjust individual scores. Instructors on both sides reviewed all assignments jointly to keep grading consistent.

In 2008, we offered the same courses again in all three locations. Sixteen U.S. student teams were matched with 12 Singapore teams and with 4 Middle East teams. Team size was kept at four to five members to offer good opportunities for one-on-one interactions among team members. In addition to the small team size, we simplified the projects to reduce external third-party dependencies and to keep students' workload more reasonably bounded and balanced across locations. The projects are listed below:

1. Five Harvard case studies: Students were asked to read their cases carefully, discuss within each team, research issues raised and report on their findings and recommendations. We selected cases that involved some cultural aspect or companies involving both the U.S. and Asia.
2. Three projects with sponsors: Students were assigned to contact, interview and gather information from a clearly defined set of sponsors to produce a project plan for an international educational collaboration.

To ensure progress and to provide feedback to students, we required an intermediate progress report from all teams. As a result, potential procrastination and slacking were uncovered early. Along with subsequent final reports, personal reflection and peer evaluations were required. Instructors in all three locations cooperated in team project assessments and assignment of grades to maintain consistency.

In 2009, we offered the course for the third time. We selected cases of interest to students in both locations and eliminated external project contacts. The case studies are listed below.

1. *Outliers* - Cockpit Dynamics and Culture: Students were assigned to read the Aviation Cockpit dynamics chapter in the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell (Gladwell 2008) and follow up with some original analysis and a report detailing their findings.
2. *Growing Up Online*: Students were asked to watch this PBS (U.S. Public Broadcasting System) episode (PBS 2008) and research, compare and contrast how teenagers and college students in their home countries use social networking sites, like facebook.

Intermediate progress reports were again required to monitor progress, slacking and to keep teams on track.

Reflections and Changes for 2010

Taking lessons from the earlier runs of the course, we made several changes to the structure of the course to create a more interesting and more consistent experience for students. With strong course enrollments in all three locations, we had considerable latitude in assigning teams and exposing students to different cultures and styles.

The capstone project for students was a global negotiation. Students were assigned into teams of four or five members each and spanning two of the three countries. Recognizing the importance of team bonding and making personal connections before beginning the negotiation project, student teams were instructed to complete an 'ice breaker' exercise with their distant peers prior to beginning the negotiation project. In this self-guided exercise, students were asked to rank the relative usefulness of various items available for survival following a hypothetical shipwreck (Lost at Sea 2010). They are required to communicate with their distant partners via a mutually convenient means - whether skype, skype chat, google chat, instant messaging, or email. To motivate students to complete the exercise, a nominal amount of credit was awarded. One week was given to complete the ice breaker exercise.

The global negotiation exercise was intended to challenge students to role-play as decision makers in a complex business scenario and report on outcomes, negotiation tactics and lessons learned. The exercise was planned over a consecutive two-week span when classes were in session in all three locations. Half the student teams read the Harvard Business School case "Tegan c.c.c" (Upton and Staats 2008a); the other half read the companion case "Hrad Technika" (Upton and Staats 2008b). These case studies describe a troubled software project and the strained relationship between the principal companies. Each party in the negotiation was assigned to negotiate terms and conditions for continuing the project and maintaining the relationship. Students were told that a no-win outcome was acceptable. After the negotiation, each team member wrote a personal reflection report and each local team wrote a report on the outcome and the global experience. During the following week, the global teams reconvened to collaborate on a short overall written assessment of the experience and negotiation outcome.

To prepare the students for this project, several topics were addressed in the lectures and a set of readings were made available to the students; cultural intelligence (Hooker 2003, Earley and Mosakowski 2004), collaboration and communication across the distance, working in global teams (Xin and Pucik 2003, Ågerfalk and Fitzgerald 2006), principled negotiation (Charles et al. 2005, Fisher et al. 2003) and global project management (Jenkins 2006, Berkun 2005, Binder 2007, HBS Press 2004).

Survey: Pre- and Post- Negotiation

Participants

Students enrolled in the course at all three campuses were surveyed before and after the 2010 negotiation exercise: 15 students attending the U.S. University, 25 students attending Singapore University and 14 attending the Middle Eastern University. The following table shows some background information on the students taking the course. All were undergraduates; most were second or third year information systems students.

	U.S.	Singapore	Middle East	Total	%
Class sizes	15	25	14	54	
Year 2 Students	47%	36%	43%	22	41%
Year 3 Students	7%	60%	43%	22	41%
Year 4 Students	40%	4%	7%	9	17%
No response	-	-	7.00%	1	1%
Proportion of students majoring in IS	67%	96%	79%	87%	

Table 1: Student background.

Pre- and Post- survey analysis

Pre- and post- project surveys were designed to gather student reactions to the experience and to help instructors assess achievement of the course objectives. Both surveys included a number of questions about the experience, including quantitative questions (for example, "Rank the skills needed for a successful global project") and qualitative questions (e.g., for the pre-survey: "What skills do you think you can bring to the global negotiation project"; "What is motivating you to take this course"; for the post-survey "What was the most rewarding aspect of the global project?", "What do you think you did well on your team or on your project", "What would you do differently next time?", "What did your distant counterparts do well?"). These questions built on the surveys described in Volkema and Rivers (Volkema and Rivers 2008).

The pre-survey recorded students' backgrounds (major course of study, year of study and the degree of exposure to global experience), motivations for taking the course, and perceptions of skills and collaboration tools needed for global project management. Students were also asked to rank potential challenges facing their project and for an estimate of the effort required to complete the project.

Several factors were suggested to students as reasons for taking this course. They were based on the theory on learning described in Ambrose, et. al. (Ambrose et al. 2010): motivation for taking a course is based on an understanding of what students *value* and what they *expect*. Motivation then leads to a goal directed behavior that supports learning and performance. The more students value the instructor's goals, the more motivated they are to pursue them (Ambrose et al. 2010).

Students were asked to choose between what they value ("to learn about project management', "others recommended the course" or "acquiring a global project management experience") and an expectation of success (for example, "completing a curriculum requirement"). Table 2 shows students' rankings of these motivational factors (1 = highest rank; 4 = lowest rank). It indicates that students favored intrinsic values over expectation of success when choosing to take the course. Learning about the topic and acquiring experience were favored over completing curriculum requirements and fulfilling classmates' recommendations. These early results were a first good indicator that students would likely complete the course and enjoy working on a challenging global project. Post-project surveys and student feedback support this observation.

	U.S.	Singapore	Middle East	All	Motivation
	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank	
'To learn about project management'	2	2	1	2	Value
'To acquire a global project management experience'	1	1	2	1	Value
'I needed it to complete my curriculum requirements'	3	3	3	3	Expectancy
'Others recommended this course'	4	4	4	4	Expectancy

Table 2: Rankings of Motivations for taking Global Project Management.

Skill Issues

Prior to starting the global negotiation project, the students were asked to indicate what they *perceived* to be important skills for the success of such projects. The skills that were suggested were based on the widely accepted skills by practitioners in the field (Govindarajan & Gupta 2001). An analysis of the data shows that team work skills, project management skills and cultural intelligence were expected to be the most important skills for a successful global negotiation project. It is interesting to note that all three cohorts agreed on the same three skills despite variations in majors and backgrounds (1 = highest rank; 8 = lowest rank).

Skill Factors	U.S.	Singapore	Middle East	All
	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank
Cultural Intelligence	3	3	3	3
Teamwork Skill	1	1	2	1
Project Management Skills	2	2	1	2
Mastery of English	5	6	7	7
Domain Skill	7	7	5	6
Global Project Experience	5	4	6	5
Collaboration Tools	4	4	3	4
Other	8	8	8	8

Table 3: Most essential skills students need for the global project management project (pre-project)

We compared students' perceptions of the skills required to the skills they believed they could individually contribute to a global project. In addition to the skills explicitly listed in Table 3, students also indicated skills in the 'other' category, revealing what they believed would be important for the project:

- Professionalism and work ethics
- Flexibility
- Organizational skills
- Negotiation skills
- Conflict management

Upon project completion, we asked the students to rank the skills they actually found to be most important to the outcomes of their collaborations. See Table 4 (1 = highest rank, 8 = lowest rank). Students generally selected the same skills they had mentioned in the pre-survey: cultural intelligence, teamwork and project management skills, while ranking cultural intelligence higher than project management. This may reflect how students dealt with the different work styles they found among their distant teammates. Comparing the three groups of students, it is notable how the Singapore students revised their ranking of 'team work' skills from the first to the fourth position, replacing it with the 'global experience' as the most important skill for the success of the project. On further evaluation of the data, Singapore students working with Middle East students find both 'teamwork' and 'global experience' mildly less important while Singapore students working with US students find 'teamwork' a lot less important and 'global experience' a lot more important.

Skill Factors	U.S.	Singapore	Middle East	All
	Rank	Rank	Rank	Rank
Cultural Intelligence	2	2	2	2
Teamwork Skill	1	4	1	1
Project Management Skills	3	5	3	3
Mastery of English	6	7	5	6
Domain Skill	7	6	5	7
Global Project Experience	5	1	7	5
Collaboration Tools	4	3	4	4
Other	8	8	8	8

Table 4: Skills students needed for the global project management project (post-project)

Figure 1 summarizes the pre- and post-project surveys for skill factors.

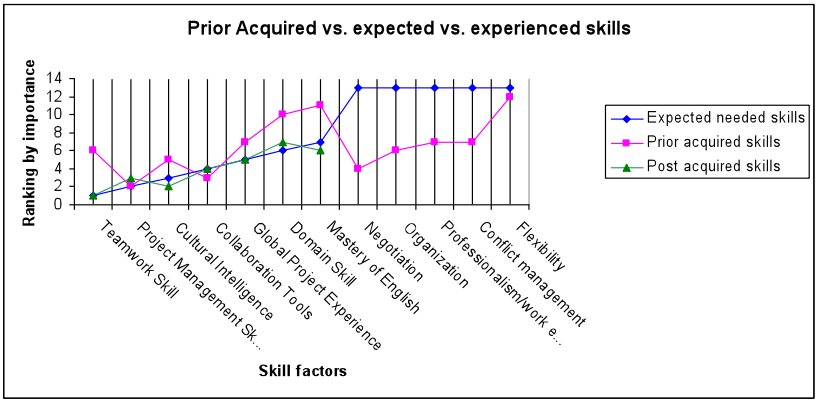

Figure 1: Students' assessment of Prior Acquired vs. expected vs. Post acquired skills

Collaboration Tools and Technologies

Students were asked about the collaboration tools they perceived to be effective for a global negotiation project. We listed common collaboration tools used by professionals, students and academics. Most students expected to use primarily skype or other VOIP tools, followed by videoconferencing, emails and instant messaging. See Table 5 (1 = highest rank, 9 = lowest rank).

Collaboration tools	U.S. Ranking		Singapore Ranking		Middle East Ranking		Overall Ranking	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Skype, Jajah, other VOIP	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1
Video Conference	3	5	3	5	1	5	2	5
Instant Messaging	6	4	2	2	7	3	4	3
e-mail	2	2	6	3	3	1	3	2
Basecamp or similar project management system	5	7	4	7	5	7	6	7
GoogleDocs of other similar collaborative document authoring system	4	3	7	4	4	3	5	4
Dropbox or similar file sharing system	7	5	5	6	6	6	7	6
Wiki	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Other	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

Table 5: Ranking of collaboration tools pre-project and post-project experience

We note how preferences changed from pre- to post-project. Upon post-project survey, Skype and similar tools, emails and instant messaging remained appreciated. Videoconferencing fell from the second to the fifth choice and was replaced by emails instead. This may be due the difficulty for student to book videoconferencing facility. It is also notable that Googledocs gained in ranking and this can be attributed to the need for a collaborative writing tool.

Challenges

In this study, we also aimed to learn what students perceive as challenges or obstacles to working on a global team project. We tested whether commonly perceived challenges make sense in our educational context. We expanded the list of challenges from the work of Govindarajan and Gupta (Govindarajan and Gupta 2001) and from the previous offerings of this course. We asked students pre- and post-project about the challenges they faced during the experience. Responses are shown in Table 6 (1 = highest ranking, 9 = lowest ranking). Pre-project, students thought the quality of communication, the interests and commitments on others' sides and the time zones differences would be the challenges they would have to pay attention to. Post-project, time zones differences,

interest and commitment levels and the quality of communication were perceived to be challenging. A notable jump is the different calendars (holidays, weekends, breaks), from the ranking of 7 to 4. Students apparently noted these factors as non-trivial challenges to manage.

Potential challenges	U.S. Ranking		Singapore Ranking		Middle East Ranking		Global Ranking	
	Perceived	Experienced	Perceived	Experienced	Perceived	Experienced	Perceived	Experienced
Different Time Zones	6	1	1	1	2	1	3	1
Different Calendars (holidays, weekends, breaks)	8	2	8	4	6	6	7	4
Quality of Communication	2	3	4	5	1	2	1	3
Cultural Differences	4	4	5	7	7	8	6	7
Different work styles or work ethics	5	5	3	3	3	5	4	5
Different incentives	7	8	7	8	8	7	8	8
Different interest or commitment levels	1	5	2	2	4	3	2	2
Unrealistic project planning (meeting deadlines, distribution of effort, etc.)	3	7	6	6	5	4	5	6
Other	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

Table 6: Perceived and experienced potential challenges for the global project experience

We note that students seemed to find more challenges in the planning of the experience and fewer challenges in the collaboration, incentives, and differences in work ethics. This is a different result from the survey of senior managers in Govindarajan and Gupta (Govindarajan and Gupta 2001). Experience in global teamwork may play a vital role and explain the difference. Newcomers to the global experience (and especially students with odd schedules and irregular work patterns) must first adjust to the complicated logistics before they can effectively deal with issues of trust and collaboration. This observation is reinforced if we compare the ranking of 'timezone' by the students in the three locations. Students in the U.S. and Singapore found it more challenging to work around time zone (average of 7 where 1 = least problematic, 8 = most problematic) than the students in the Middle East (average of 5.5). This is explained by the fact that time differences between Singapore and the U.S. location is 13 hours while it is only five hours between Singapore and the Middle East location. Informally and in their statements of reflection, students consistently reported difficulty in finding common times or days for calls, live chats and collaborative working sessions.

Students comments

The majority of students found the experience rewarding, interesting, insightful and fun. However, it is not without challenges. In the post survey and reports, students wrote a number of comments about the experience, reflecting on what they learned about global project management as well as about a principled negotiation.

- On what worked well, some students attribute it to the icebreaker, preparation and project management. Some comments from the students are as follows

- "I believe getting a chance to know all teammates through the Ice Breaker case is a very important first step, which helped us a lot"
- "I feel that we had done adequate preparation before the start of negotiation as we had identified the goals and recommendation"
- "We adopted a role-based style during the negotiation process, I was in charge of carrying out the conversation with the other party, my teammate would input the main details into Google docs to summarize the important information for both parties"
- "By focusing on the core issues, we avoid being clouded by emotions and posturing."

- On challenges, the global negotiation presented some issues such as time zone differences, coordinating global collaborations, and lack of visual cues.

- "The global collaboration was the most challenging aspect of the project. Cultural differences, individual commitments, time-zones, “first-time” feelings—we had them all!"
- "...One of the biggest obstacles was finding the right time to hold meeting"
- “Sometimes during the negotiation, we can encounter a standstill where everyone keeps silent and not knowing what to comment on”
- “Even though I had chatted through Skype before, I found it awkward at the beginning when we started a Skype conference call for this negotiation case as usually I do not even chat online to people who I have never met face to face”
- “The problem we faced is the lack of ability to ensure all members are focusing and actively participating in the conference”

- On cultural differences, our students experienced both challenges and learning opportunities.

- "...one really important lesson I learnt in this project, is the role culture plays. I never realized how much it affected business until I engaged in this experience... ".
- "...I’ve also had personal skype conversations with our Singaporean counterparts, and they are very fun and hardworking people. I think what will stick with me from this global encounter is their work ethic, which is extremely amazing. "
- “Through the ice-breaker exercise I discovered certain traits, such as openness in expressing themselves in a conversations: joking about almost everything, it was decided that we might have more success if we remain slightly informal in our discussion and be willing to accept sarcastic jokes from them rather than adopting a stern attitude and mistaking their humor for mockery; they would feel more comfortable conversing with us"

Despite the challenges and cultural differences, we believe the students had an educational experience they will remember. Here are some student comments.

- "...The global project was a very interesting and beneficial experience for me. At first, I was worried that I’d be shy and that I wouldn’t be very comfortable talking with the other team members in a different country. The Asian culture was very vague for me. I didn’t know what to expect."
- "My previous team working experiences included poor communication, conflicts within team members and last minute meetings. Studying in this course and learning about negotiation techniques, global team work skills and productivity tools has been beneficial and enhanced my contribution to the team as well as my teammates’ contribution".
- “Being able to actually work with students on the other side of the globe and coming to agreements was very rewarding”
- “The experience of actually applying concepts was rewarding. One can learn most by actually doing work”
- “This course gave me a chance to experience collaborating with a person who I might never meet with. This literally made me feel the effect of globalization. I had a good time working with all my teammates (local and foreign) as they have also put in a lot of effort to make this negotiation successful.”
- “This experience of working with students in SE Asia was the best thing I had ever done in my life. I learned a lot about the global team project and how to manage working with people from different parts of the world. I really hope to have such an experience in the following years. Moreover, I'm hoping to keep in touch with my team… I just like my team!”

Conclusion

To provide an educational and rewarding global project experience for students, it is essential to carefully plan course logistics, define global projects of wide interest and foster a close collaboration between the instructors. After conducting four runs of "Global Project Management", we have been able to demonstrate the educational benefits of the global project for our students.

From the instructors' points of view, managing student working relationships, motivating students to commit to the collaboration, providing the necessary tools and infrastructure, preparing students with the right skills and setting the right learning expectations are critical to course success and student learning. Pre- and post-project

surveys demonstrate the differences between students' expectations and experience in skill sets, tools and technologies, and project challenges. In future iterations of the course, we will incorporate these perceptions and experiences into the course design. In addition, we will consider other improvements as suggested by our students: inviting more guest speakers to share their experiences in global projects, assigning roles to team members, orienting the ice breaker towards students' learning about each other, and conducting initial video conferences for teams. The project challenges, logistics and cultural differences students faced in this course provides high fidelity, important and potentially useful lessons in global teamwork.

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